

Headline: SECRETARY LEAVITT ANNOUNCES STREAMLINED ACCESS TO BENEFITS FOR HURRICANE KATRINA VICTIMS

HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt today began a two-day visit with evacuees in shelters in Georgia, Arkansas, Texas and Tennessee to explain the wide array of benefits that are being made easily available to those who have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Many victims of the hurricane no longer have the records or legal documents to help prove their eligibility for benefits from various government programs. The President has granted special "evacuee" status to individuals affected by Katrina, which will simplify the enrollment process for people who need the services of programs like Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Head Start.

"For those persons with evacuee status, we are stripping away many of the eligibility and enrollment requirements normally needed to apply for federal benefits," Secretary Leavitt said. "No one who has been a victim of this disaster should be prevented from getting benefits they need because of government red tape." As part of this streamlining process, states will be given the flexibility to enroll evacuees without requiring documents such as tax returns or proof of residency. Evacuees who have lost all identification and records should be able to give their address or other simple form of attestation to be eligible.

The special evacuee status will apply to the full range of federal benefits administered by the states, including HHS programs that provide services through Medicaid, family assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), child care support, foster care assistance, mental health services and substance abuse treatment services.

State enrollment teams are already set up in many shelters, and many have 1-800 numbers people can call. Any evacuee can go to the nearest state or local benefits offices to get information and get enrolled. Evacuees staying in a home or church that has access to the Internet, or who can visit a nearby public library with Internet access, can also enroll by going to www.govbenefits.gov.